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KNOFF, S.A.

William T.G. Morton. Boston,
1920.

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[Reprinted from the BOSTON MEDICAL AND SURGICAL JOURNAL,
Vol. clxxxiii, No. 11, September 9, 1920.]



WILLIAM T. G. MORTON, THE DISCOVERER AND REVEALER OF SURGICAL ANESTHESIA: A PLEA FOR HIS PLACE IN THE HALL OF FAME.

BY S. ADOLPHUS KNOPE, M.D., NEW YORK.

THERE still seems to be some misunderstanding among certain physicians concerning the man to whom belongs the credit of revealing and promulgating the use of sulphuric ether as a means to produce surgical anesthesia. I am therefore grateful to the BOSTON MEDICAL AND SURGICAL JOURNAL for being willing to offer its columns once more for a somewhat detailed discussion on the subject. On April 29, the editor of this periodical was good enough to publish my open letter entitled "No Physician or Surgeon as yet in the Hall of Fame." In that communication I explored the fact that no physician or surgeon had yet been found worthy to be named among the great American immortals. I ventured to suggest as the three most worthy names, William T. G. Morton, the discoverer of ether anesthesia; Ephraim McDowell, the first surgeon to perform a rational, deliberate, and successful ovariectomy, and J. Marion Sims, a great gynecologist who perfected the plastic operation in the vagina for the relief of vesical fis-

tulae and invented the speculum. I stated that the nomination should be sent to the Senate of the New York University, University Heights, New York City, and that this should be done by every American physician who feels the great injustice done to the American medical profession by the apparent neglect or oversight of the previous electors.

I received many letters of approval of my humble efforts and of my choice of the three names mentioned. A few of my correspondents, however, objected to the name of William T. G. Morton as not being the discoverer of surgical anesthesia, and in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* of April 24, there appeared a strong letter signed by Dr. S. J. Lewis, according to which the priority of the discovery of sulphuric ether as an anesthetic belongs to Dr. Crawford W. Long. It would lead to no result to recall here all the details of the old controversy between Morton, Long, and Jackson of half a century ago; the fact remains that before any one of these three men thought of the subject of anesthesia, means to subdue pain by all sorts of physical agents, such as various vapors, lotions, etc., were employed, and even hypnosis was resorted to by Esdaile and Elliotson (1790-1868) who operated hundreds of patients in the hypnotic state. Granted that Crawford W. Long discovered the anesthetic properties of sulphuric ether long before Morton, he did not make known this

method of producing sleep and insensibility to pain. Long did not prove to the medical profession that surgical anesthesia with the aid of sulphuric ether was "certain, safe, and complete." These words were used by Dr. Henry J. Bigelow, a member of the staff which was present during the operation on that memorable day of October 16, 1846.

Concerning the priority claims of Long and Jackson, Dr. J. Collins Warren, Moseley Professor of Surgery Emeritus, Harvard University, who wrote me only recently in reference to this matter, says: "It is probable that Long performed three or four minor operations with primary anesthetic and then abandoned his claims. As Dr. Keen says, he is deserving of nothing but censure for not having appreciated the value of the agent." Regarding the claims of Jackson and his heirs, it cannot be too strongly insisted upon that Dr. Charles T. Jackson was very unwilling to have anything to do with the discovery at first. According to a letter by a son of one of those present at the first operation, Dr. J. C. Warren, Jackson made the statement that "Morton would kill somebody next," and it was not until he had attended an operation in Dr. Warren's father's office, to which he was invited and saw Morton give the ether most successfully that Jackson came out the next day with an article in the newspaper claiming a share in the discovery. The heirs of Dr. Jackson now

say that he was prevented from making the first public demonstration, that is to say, prevented from doing what Morton did at the Massachusetts General Hospital on October 16, 1846. The reason for Jackson's not doing this is given by the heirs as his being obliged to fill an important engagement to survey some mines in Maryland, but they state that he had directed Morton what to do and how to do it and assumed all responsibility. According to this, Jackson evidently thought the surveying of some mines more important than to give in person the first administration of sulphuric ether to a human being to prevent the pain and suffering which patients and surgeons had endured for centuries. Jackson's claim to have assumed all responsibility without himself administering the ether, would not have cleared Morton from guilt (homicide), had the patient not survived the experiment. Thus to Morton and not to Jackson belongs the honor of demonstrating to the world the greatest conquest of the age.

Regarding the responsibility for the result of the first demonstration of general anesthesia and the method of administering the ether, Dr. George W. Gay, Senior Surgeon of the Boston City Hospital, and ex-President of the Massachusetts Medical Society, very pertinently says:

"The man who gave the anesthetic upon the memorable occasion at the Massachusetts Gen-

eral Hospital was Dr. William Thomas Green Morton. He had experimented with sulphuric ether, had demonstrated its safety and efficiency and sought an opportunity to show its efficiency in general surgery. He assumed the sole responsibility of the demonstration. The results, whatever they might be, rested upon him. His enterprise, his enthusiasm and his courage brought success. Whatever suggestions or assistance he may have received from others, he was *the* man that made anesthesia a practical, every-day blessing to mankind."

It has recently been my privilege to visit the Nestor of American surgeons, the venerable Dr. Stephen Smith, a physician who began his medical career before the epoch-making revelation of general anesthesia for capital operations. Those who have the rare good fortune to see Dr. Smith today in his 98th year, will be surprised at the physical and mental vigor of this veteran. When I told him of my efforts to get recognition for Morton and to place his name in the Hall of Fame, he promised me his assistance. I begged him to give me the information in writing, and on July 30, 1920, he was good enough to send me what follows:

"Regarding your inquiry about Dr. William T. G. Morton, I am very glad to forward you a few personal reminiscences. At the time of the controversy in Congress over the question of priority in the discovery of anesthesia I was Editor of the *New York Journal of Medicine*.

Dr. Morton called several times on me to discuss the situation and I had an opportunity to estimate the value of much of the evidence presented by the competitors. Dr. Morton was a man of pleasing personality, always faultlessly dressed, extremely courteous, and evidently controlled by a highly organized nervous system. It was due to his restless nervous activity that anesthesia was finally brought to a public test. His advocacy and practice of anesthesia in dentistry created a host of enemies who sought his ruin. He met them with ever-renewed instances of success and finally with the famous operation of Professor Warren on the sixteenth of October, 1846, at the Massachusetts General Hospital. Even at this operation the enemies took advantage of a slight delay in the appearance of Dr. Morton to impress the large audience of Boston's most prominent physicians and surgeons that he did not dare face a real trial of his vaunted anesthetic. It was only at the conclusion of the operation when Dr. Warren spoke these words heard around the world,—‘Gentlemen, this is no humbug,’—that they were silenced.”

Dr. Smith then refers me to his contribution on History of Medicine in the latest edition of the *Medical Reference Handbook* (Vol. viii, pp. 55 and 56), published by Wm. Wood & Co., New York, and to his article on “Reminiscences of the Introduction of Anesthesia and Asepsis” in the *Johns Hopkins Hospital Bulletin* of

September, 1919 (p. 273). Both of these articles contain more detailed and explicit information concerning the right of Morton's claim to priority in the matter of introducing general anesthesia by sulphuric ether.

The question resolves itself into what is meant by priority in the case of a great discovery. In Owen's "Homologies of the Skeleton" we read the following definition of priority: "He becomes the true discoverer who establishes the truth, and the sign of the truth is the general acceptance. Whoever, therefore, resumes the investigation of neglected or repudiated doctrine, elicits its true demonstration, and discovers and explains the nature of the errors which have led to its tacit or declared rejection, may certainly and confidently await the acknowledgment of his right in its discovery."

Francis Darwin in *Eugenics Review*, 1914, makes it still clearer when he says: "In science the credit goes to the man who convinces the world, not to the man to whom the idea first occurs." Morton convinced the world; the credit is his.

The late Sir William Osler, our greatest modern medical historian, to whom I referred in my first communication, considers Morton the inventor and revealer of anesthesia by sulphuric ether, and he speaks of him as a new "Prometheus who gave a gift to the world as rich as that of fire, the greatest single gift ever made

to suffering humanity." He pertinently asks in one of his latest essays on the subject (*Annals of Medical History*, Vol. 1, No. 4) :

"Why do we not give the credit to Dioscorides, who described both general and local anesthesia, or to Pliny, or Apuleius, or to Hiotho, the Chinaman, who seems to be next in order, or to the inventor of the spongia somnifera, or to Master Mazzeo Montagna, in Boccaccio, or to any one of the score or more of men in the Middle Ages who are known to have operated on patients made insensible by drugs or vapors?"

In addition to the testimony of Osler, that to Morton and to no one else should be given the credit, I may be permitted to copy a part of a page from the *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* of August, 1894, containing a personal letter from Oliver Wendell Holmes, sent to Mr. E. L. Snell on April 2, 1893:

"This letter was written in reply to an inquiry addressed by the writer of the present article (Mr. Snell) to Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, who was a member of the medical staff of the Massachusetts General Hospital at the time of the discovery. Following is the full text."

"Boston, April 2, 1893.

"My dear Sir:—

"Few persons have or had better reason than myself to assert the claim of Dr. Morton to the introduction of artificial anesthesia into surgical practice. The discovery was formally introduced to the scientific world in a paper read before the American Academy of Arts and Sciences by Dr. Henry J. Bigelow, one of the first, if not the first, of American surgeons.

"On the evening before the reading of the paper containing the announcement of the discovery, Dr. Bigelow called at my office to read the paper to me.

He prefaced it with a few words which could never be forgotten.

"He told me that a great discovery had been made, and its genuineness demonstrated at the Massachusetts General Hospital, of which he was one of the surgeons. This was the production of insensibility to pain during surgical operations by the inhalation of a certain vapor (the same afterward shown to be that of sulphuric ether).

"In a very short time, he said, this discovery would be all over Europe. He had taken a great interest in the alleged discovery, had been present at the first capital operation performed under its influence, and was from the first the adviser and supporter of Dr. W. T. G. Morton, who had induced the surgeons of the hospital to make trial of the means by which he proposed to work this new miracle.

"The discovery went all over the world like a conflagration. The only question was whether Morton got advice from Dr. Charles T. Jackson, the chemist, which entitled that gentleman to a share, greater or less, in the merit of the discovery. Later it was questioned whether he did not owe his first hint to Dr. Horace Wells of Hartford, which need not be disputed.

"Both these gentlemen deserve honorable mention in connection with the discovery, but I have never a moment hesitated in awarding the essential credit of the great achievement to Dr. Morton.

"This priceless gift to humanity went forth from the operating theatre of the Massachusetts General Hospital, and the man to whom the world owes it is Dr. William Thomas Green Morton.

"Yours very truly,

"O. W. HOLMES."

As further evidence that the credit should be given to Morton, I will cite a paragraph from an address by Prof. William H. Welch, of Baltimore, delivered on October 16, 1908 (the 62nd Anniversary of Ether Day), as follows:

"The attendant circumstances were such as to make the operation performed on October 16, 1846, in the surgical amphitheater of this hospital, by John Collins Warren, upon the pa-

tient, Gilbert Abbott, placed in the sleep of ether anesthesia by William Morton, the decisive event from which date the first convincing public demonstration of surgical anesthesia, the continuous, orderly, historical development of the subject, and the promulgation to the world of the glad tidings of this conquest of pain. Had this demonstration or any subsequent one of like nature failed of success, it is improbable that we should have heard much of claims to the prior discovery of surgical anesthesia."

In a letter dated July 29, 1920, Professor Welch heartily endorsing my efforts on behalf of William T. G. Morton, writes: "Surgical anesthesia has been America's greatest contribution to medicine and surgery and it would be a thousand pities not to have this recognized in the Hall of Fame. As only one name can be selected for this purpose, it is clear to me that this name should be Morton."

I know that no one ever devoted more time and labor to the unbiased search for the truth in this ether controversy, especially the Morton-Jackson issue, than Professor William H. Welch. Thus I sincerely hope that the documentary evidence given by Henry J. Bigelow, Oliver Wendell Holmes, S. Weir Mitchell, Stephen Smith and William H. Welch, and the opinions expressed by such men as Warren, Osler, Gay, and Keen, may suffice to settle the controversy for good and all. Having sent the evidences at my disposal to the 102 electors it was gratifying to me to receive from Prof.

R. S. Woodward, the President of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, one of the electors, a most courteous letter in which among other things he says:

"I had already seen most of the data you furnish but it will all be useful for reference in connection with the rather arduous tasks the Electors of the Hall of Fame have assumed. It is a great pity that partisanship with respect to the merits of various candidates should be pushed so hard as it is. But data such as you have furnished serve to mitigate the severity of such partisanship. The facsimile of the letter of Oliver Wendell Holmes is very convincing in respect to the case of Morton.*

Dr. Charles H. Mayo, the distinguished surgeon of Rochester, Minn., one of the electors of this year, wrote me as follows: "It is a sad commentary that no medical man's work has been considered of sufficient importance to warrant a tablet in the Hall of Fame." In some quarters objection to Morton has been raised because he having been a dentist does not really represent the medical profession. Leaving aside the fact that he studied medicine a number of years and Harvard having conferred upon Morton an honorary degree of Doctor of Medicine, should we not and do we not consider dental surgery a branch of general surgery? This, too, is the opinion of no less an authority than Prof. William H. Welch, the Dean of Johns Hopkins Medical School.

* A fac-simile of Oliver Wendell Holmes's letter, addressed to Mr. Snell, was sent to each of the 102 electors of the Hall of Fame.

There should not be any difference of opinion as to the nomination of Morton to the Hall of Fame, and every American physician and surgeon and dental surgeon could and should be helpful in bringing about this just reward to the memory of a man to whom the whole civilized world is indebted for this gift of medicine to mankind—"the death of pain."

The electors have until October first to make their decision, so there are time and opportunity for all those interested to write to any one of the 102 electors for the Hall of Fame, or to the Senate of the New York University. By addressing a request to Mrs. William Vanamee, the Secretary and Acting Director of the Hall of Fame, 347 Madison Avenue, New York City, a list of this year's electors will be furnished.

Fortunately we have among the electors this year no less than four medical representatives, —Major General Leonard Wood, Prof. William H. Welch, and Drs. William J. and Charles H. Mayo. I hope the good and great General will forgive me for still claiming him as one of ours.

We should not only have William T. G. Morton, but also several other of our great Americans belonging to the profession of physicians and surgeons in the Hall of Fame. In my first communication on the subject I mentioned Ephraim McDowell and J. Marion Sims. From a rather voluminous correspondence resulting from my first article entitled "No Physician or Surgeon as yet in the Hall of Fame,"

which appeared in nearly all of the leading American medical journals during the month of April, I gather that there is also a strong desire to see the great Benjamin Rush (1745-1813), whom Roswell Park in his History of Medicine calls "the most conspicuous medical character of the century," included among America's great immortals. Rush will always be held in grateful admiration as an acute observer of diseases by American internists. His descriptions of clinical phenomena are today as classic and authoritative as when published, and of course I am glad to include the man after whom Rush Medical College is named among those of our profession who should have a place in the Hall of Fame. Lastly, there is Walter Reed, who should not be forgotten. His discovery of the mode of conveyance of yellow fever has resulted in the saving of untold thousands of lives, and it is to be hoped that his name will also soon be found among the immortals in the Hall of Fame. But however great the achievements of Rush, McDowell, Sims and Reed may be, those of Morton surpass them all. Because of his epoch-making revelation surgery was made painless, and thanks to this it has become an almost perfect art and science whereby countless lives are saved annually throughout the civilized world.

It may not be universally known that Morton died virtually in poverty and heartbroken because he had received no recognition for his

epoch-making discovery and daring experiment. I feel that I cannot close this ardent appeal for justice to "the inventor and revealer of anesthetic inhalation before whom in all time surgery was agony" better than by quoting a few verses from the immortal poem, "The Birth and Death of Pain," by the late Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, read on October 16, 1896, at the Commemoration of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the First Public Demonstration of Surgical Anesthesia:

What angel bore the Christ-like gift inspired!
 What love divine with noblest courage fired
 One eager soul that paid in bitter tears
 For the glad helping of unnumbered fears,
 From the strange record of creation tore
 The sentence sad, each sorrowing mother bore,
 Struck from the roll of pangs one awful sum
 Made pain a dream, and suffering gently dumb!

Whatever triumph still shall hold the mind,
 Whatever gift shall yet enrich mankind,
 Ah! here, no hour shall strike through all the years,
 No hour as sweet, as when hope, doubt and fears,
 'Mid deepened stillness, watched one eager brain,
 With God-like will, decree the Death of Pain.

How did we thank him? Ah! no joy-bells rang.
 No peans greeted, and no poet sang,
 No cannon thundered, from the guarded strand,
 This mighty victory to a grateful land!
 We took the gift, so humbly, simply given,
 And coldly selfish—left our debt to Heaven.
 How shall we thank him? Hush! a gladder hour
 Has struck for him, a wiser, juster power
 Shall know full well how fitly to reward
 The generous soul that found the world so hard.

Oh! fruitful Mother—you, whose thronging states,
 Shall deal not vainly with man's changing fates,
 Of freeborn thought, or war's heroic deeds,
 Much have your proud hands given, but naught
 exceeds

This Heaven-sent answer to the cry of prayer,
 This priceless gift which all mankind may share.

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ELECTION OF A PHYSICIAN TO THE HALL OF FAME.

IN a letter published in another column of this issue of the JOURNAL, attention has been called to the fact that hitherto no physician or surgeon has been recognized as worthy of a place in the Hall of Fame. For this distinction, Dr. S. Adolphus Knopf has suggested the names of three physicians, William T. G. Morton, Ephraim McDowell, and J. Marion Sims. The proposal of the name of Dr. Morton has aroused some objections, on the ground that he was not the discoverer of surgical anesthesia. In support of Dr. Morton's claim we are glad to quote the following extracts from a letter submitted to the Senate of the University of New York by Dr. J. Collins Warren, Moseley Professor of Surgery Emeritus, Harvard University:

p65, name
Morton -

"I understand that medicine has thus far received no representative in the Hall of Fame, and yet America gave to the world one of the greatest, if not the greatest, contribution to medical science, thus inaugurating a new epoch in the history of medicine.

"This epoch was ushered in on what is now known as Ether Day, October 16, 1846, when

Morton gave the first public demonstration of surgical anesthesia in the Massachusetts General Hospital. Of this event Professor William H. Welch of Johns Hopkins University says: 'The attendant circumstances were such as to make the operation performed on October 16, 1846, in the surgical amphitheatre of this hospital the decisive event, from which date the first convincing public demonstration of surgical anesthesia, the continuous, orderly, historical development of the subject and the promulgation to the world of the glad tidings of this conquest of pain.'

"Two months later, on December 21, 1846, Robert Liston performed the first operation under ether in Europe at the University College Hospital in London. The operation was an amputation of the thigh and was painless. Of this discovery Liston said, 'This Yankee dodge, gentlemen, beats mesmerism hollow.' In three months time the use of ether had become a world-wide procedure. (*The Lancet*, October 26, 1915, 'Ether Day in London, October 16.')

In a communication to the electors of the Hall of Fame, William J. Morton has called attention to the fact that Dr. Morton applied in vain to his own Government for some compensation and reward for his services; that although his claim as the discoverer was con-

ceded in majority reports of no less than six committees of Congress and various bills were reported, the matter ended with no action favorable to Dr. Morton. Is it not fitting that he who at least made known to the medical profession the practical demonstrability of surgical anesthesia should be given a place among other leading Americans in the Hall of Fame?

[Reprinted from the BOSTON MEDICAL AND SURGICAL JOURNAL,
Vol. clxxxiii, No. 11, September 9, 1920.]

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[The following letter has been sent by the author to each of the
Electors of the Hall of Fame.]

DR. MORTON IN THE HALL OF FAME.

Boston, June 18, 1920.

To the Senate of the University of New York,
University Heights, New York, N. Y.

Gentlemen:

Previous to October 16, 1846, surgical anesthesia was unknown. Hitherto surgical operations had been mental and physical torture to the patient as well as to the surgeon. Those unfortunate persons about to undergo an operation were plied with opium, alcohol and other drugs, restrained by attendants, bound to a chair, or lashed to the operating table. The operating rooms in the hospitals were located in the cupola, or as remote as possible, in order that the inmates of the institution might not be disturbed by the shrieks and groans of the sufferers. In consequence thereof, operations were comparatively infrequent, suffering was rampant and lives were unavoidably sacrificed. It is simply impossible for the present generation to realize or to comprehend the management of surgical cases in those days.

Upon that epochal Friday morning in 1846 these dreadful conditions were radically and permanently changed by the introduction of anesthesia. Painless surgery, as we know it today, was successfully demonstrated upon that occasion for the first time in public at the Massachusetts General Hospital in the presence of a representative assembly of physicians and students. At the conclusion of the operation, the surgeon, Dr. John Collins Warren, remarked to the intensely interested audience, "Gentlemen, this is no humbug!"

From that moment painless surgery became an established fact. Other operations, equally successful, speedily followed, and in a short time the great discovery was known and in use all over the civilized world.

The man who gave the anesthetic upon that memorable occasion at the Massachusetts General Hospital

was Dr. William Thomas Green Morton. He had experimented with sulphuric ether, had demonstrated its safety and efficiency in dentistry, and sought an opportunity to show its efficiency in general surgery. He assumed the sole responsibility of the demonstration. The results, whatever they might be, rested upon him. His enterprise, his enthusiasm, and his courage brought success. Whatever suggestions or assistance he may have received from others, he was *the* man who made anesthesia a practical, everyday blessing to mankind. The one fundamental fact to be borne always in mind is that previous to Dr. Morton's demonstration of anesthesia, surgical operations were attended by indescribable agony, mental and physical; that afterwards, and as a direct result of the demonstration, they were, and always will be, accompanied by hope and comfort. To him belongs the credit of this great discovery. No man has done as much for the relief of the suffering of the human race.

The medical profession appreciated the importance of Dr. Morton's great service to humanity as no other class in the community is able to do, and the writer begs leave to suggest that his name be found worthy of a place in the Hall of Fame in New York by your honorable body.

Very respectfully,

Your obedient servant,

GEORGE W. GAY, M.D.,

*Senior Surgeon, Boston City Hospital,
Ex-President, Massachusetts Medical Society,
Member of British Medical Association, etc.*

W. H. H. H.
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Author

Knopf, S.A.

William T.G.Morton

1920

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